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**‘Skatepark Worlds: Constructing Communities and Building Lives’**

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# Skatepark Worlds.

## Constructing Communities and Building Lives

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*Iain Borden*

Over the last two decades, a veritable skatepark renaissance has been underway. Fuelled by the popularity of street-skating, the X Games, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater video game (Activision, 1999), new legislation reducing liability claims, a slew of magazines and the emergent internet, skateboarding was on rise. By 2000, over 180 skateparks of various sizes, complexity and ownership had already opened across the US, while expert constructors like Airspeed, California Skateparks, Dreamland, Grindline, PTR/Placed To Ride, Purkiss Rose, SITE, Team Pain and Wormhoudt were also appearing.<sup>1</sup>

Today, similar expertise exists globally, from Convic in Australia, to Canvas, Freestyle, Gravity, Maverick and Wheelscape in the UK, or Constructo and The Edge in France, Vertical in Switzerland, Mystic in the Czech Republic, G Ramps and Lndskt in Germany and Spectrum and New Line in Canada. The results can be impressive. "To say that Oregon's Newberg and Lincoln City skateparks are masterpieces is not an exaggeration", asserts Jocko Weyland (2002, p. 318).

"These works put their builders in league with artists like Richard Serra, Robert Smithson and James Turrell: the parks are beautiful environments, awesome to look at and, on some level, superior to sculpture because they combine aestheticism with athletic functionalism." (Weyland, 2002, p. 318)

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1 Sections of this chapter are also contained in Borden, I. (2019). *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History*. London: Bloomsbury.

Yet skateparks offer far more than fantastical forms and exciting riding surfaces. In particular, different users, whether from constructing, operating, riding or just hanging out at skateparks. But this very distinction can lead to occasional disquiet, particularly with non-skaters, some of whom exhibit what Taylor and Khan (2016) call a “moral teenophobic panic” over young people socialising together, and so perceive skateparks as having negative impacts through injuries, noise, graffiti and disorder (cf. Woolley & Johns, 2001). Even liberal-minded champions of vernacular landscapes like Jackson (1984, pp. 130-132) have voiced concerns. “Noisy, deliberately artificial in its man-made topography, used by a boisterous and undisciplined public, and dedicated to violent expenditure of energy”, worried Jackson, for whom the skatepark “repudiates and makes a mockery of everything the word *park* has stood for” (ibid., p. 130).

Given the unfortunate prevalence of such misguided opinions, skateparks are unsurprisingly often located in marginal sites, placed out-of-town next to the recycling bins, car park or other low-quality site. Yet concrete skateparks actually produce similarly low levels of noise as playgrounds, one Australian study found no correlation with graffiti incidence, and still other New Zealand and UK studies have actually identified reductions in crime after skatepark construction; at the UK’s Dorchester, elderly residents and police alike noted the huge community benefits of their centrally-located skatepark, including a forty-five per cent fall in antisocial behaviour (cf. Taylor & Marais, 2011; McFadyen & Longhurst, 2014; BBC, 2014). In short, skateparks typically offer distinct social, cultural, health and even economic advantages, often stretching far beyond the act of skateboarding.

In this chapter I explore these aspects of skateboard culture, showing how skateparks themselves can create new forms of community, and also how social enterprises can use skateboarding and skateparks to enable social change at challenging locations worldwide.

## CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES

Some claim that the unstructured nature of skateboarding (in contrast to the rules, training and supervision of regular sports) leads to antisocial violence, public nuisance, vandalism and substance abuse: “If you let the skaters”, opined one Seattle objector, “you are just opening our neighborhood to pushers, pimps, paedophiles, and prostitutes” (Carr, 2012, p. 71). Yet such outbursts are typically based on false perceptions rather than actual evidence. Indeed, to the contrary, and as numerous studies demonstrate, skateparks help build adolescents’ auton-

omy, social skills, self-confidence, friendships and peer-group status. Encouraging skaters to learn about cooperation, design, negotiation and aiding others, plus gaining a sense of ownership, belonging and responsibility, are key features of skateparks (cf. Bradley, 2010; Carr, 2012; Jones & Graves, 2000; Goldberg & Shooter, 2007).

Problems do of course arise, for, as Daniel Turner and John Carr have shown, like any public space skateparks are areas of negotiation, where ‘noise, low-level mischief, and reproduction of patriarchy are often inseparable from developing community, the building of self-esteem, and the creation of positive life paths’. Very occasionally, conflicts are irresolvable, as when skaters who repeatedly transgress skatepark rules (typically ranging from helmet-wearing, session times and entrance fees to bans on smoking, alcohol and abuse) are excluded or simply boycott the facility. In such instances, skateparks may lose some of the very people they were most intended to reach (cf. Turner, 2013a, pp. 189-210 and 211-214; Carr, 2012, p. 72).

### **Community scenes**

Nonetheless, positive qualities are substantial, and indeed skateparks readily answer Putnam’s plea for less of the “civic broccoli” which is “good for you but unappealing” and more “ingenious combinations of values and fun” (Putnam, 2000, p. 406). For example, Sendra (2015, pp. 820-836), following the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, argues that less-regulated and free-access skateparks like London’s Stockwell operate as urban “unbound points”, offering zones of creativity and resistance. In more practical terms, as the Montreal-based study by Dumas & Laforest (2009) shows, skateparks not only lead to fewer injuries than street-skating or indeed mainstream sports, but also provide “opportunity structures” for enhancing skaters’ social, psychological and physical well-being; another Canadian research project concluded that skateparks were more than just places to skate, being realms where riders were “welcomed, accepted and encouraged” (Shannon & Werner, 2008, pp. 39-58). Similarly British skateparks in rural and deprived locations help build social capital, as places where “teenagers actively contribute to shaping their communities” (Weller, 2006, pp. 557-574). Local skaters often back up these academic assertions, as with Kevin and Hollywood, two Michigan skaters interviewed by Robert Petrone. “For some of these kids it’s a second home”, explained Kevin of his local Franklin skatepark. “This is my way to get away from everything, from my home stress, work stress. I come up here every night. Meet up with my friends and skateboard a little”. Or

as Hollywood simply stated, “if I didn’t have this skate park, I’d be in jail” (Petrone, 2008, p. 94).

Clearly then, as Dumas & Laforest (2009) state, skateparks can be “favourable spaces for attracting youth to safe and active lifestyles”, and many local authorities worldwide have wisely concurred; for example, Queensland, Australia, considers a skatepark to be “a hub for community life” and “a catalyst for healthy community life in which young and old socialize, have fun, develop new skills, make new friends, hang out and much more” (ibid., pp. 19-34; Bradley, 2010, p. 290).

These beneficial effects are in part due to the act of skateboarding itself, and partly due to social groupings, but also due to changes in recent skatepark design. In 2000 Jones & Graves (2000, p. 290) criticised six 1990s Oregon skateparks as being “inside the bowl” designs rather than community spaces. Similarly, Chiu (2009, pp. 38-39) noted criticisms of New York’s Hudson River skatepark for being “like a cage” and a “forced environment” with strict opening hours, plus, when compared to street-skatespots, less authenticity. But by around 2010, skateparks were becoming less dangerous and more welcoming of skaters of different ages, genders and backgrounds. Besides their more varied riding terrains, skateparks now also often include water fountains, lighting, seating, tables, barbecue and hang-out areas, while artful landscaping, avant-garde architecture and interior design, skate shops, cafés and even Wi-Fi are increasingly common. Integration within larger urban design and landscape projects can also occur. Chicago’s substantial 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> Burnham skatepark nestles alongside a nature prairie, bird sanctuaries, water trail, bicycle paths, playground, marina and beach house, while New Zealand’s Marine Parade skatepark in Napier is accompanied by a splash park and concert venue, so creating “a public space that belongs to all of Napier and beyond” (Vivioni, 2010, pp. 55-60; [www.chicagopark-district.com](http://www.chicagopark-district.com); [www.napier.govt.nz](http://www.napier.govt.nz)).

The best skateparks, then, are far more than just isolated and exclusive terrains accessible only by courageous males. For example, although undoubtedly some women have felt excluded from skateparks, this is not always the case; one Vancouver skatepark explored by Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie (2008) has offered a marginal space for its Park Gang riders to enact political expression, first challenging and then gaining respect from male counterparts, while also developing alternative female identities. Similar qualities were also evident in 2010s Ontario, where newcomers frequented skateparks in order to gradually enter the skate scene, while community-oriented skateparks in public parks, and which attract a wide range of rider abilities and ages, can prove more attractive to female skaters (cf. Harris, 2011, pp. 117-132; Carr, 2016).

Many skateparks worldwide today work hard at fostering this kind of atmosphere, using female-only and age-specific sessions along with numerous jams, Halloween evenings, graffiti and DJ workshops, school-related projects and other events to encourage accessibility and sense of belonging. “It’s not just a skatepark”, explains the manager of Dundee’s Factory Skatepark, “it’s a twenty-first century community facility” (Turner, 2013b, p. 1254). Other places, such as the DIY Parasite skatepark in New Orleans, reflect transgressive behaviour through their semi-illegal construction but also, through their collaborative nature, encourage positive social behaviour and individual development (cf. Edwards, 2015, p. 45).

Age variety is another significant feature of many current skateparks, and besides the most commonplace teenagers, skaters under ten-years-old are also prevalent (typically accompanied by parents), and sometimes receive lessons. Much older skaters are also frequently drawn to skateparks; a 2015 survey by the Skaters Over 50 Facebook group showed that sixty-two per cent of these riders preferred skatepark and transition skate terrains, compared to just twenty-two per cent for street and sixteen per cent for freestyle, slalom and downhill (cf. [www.facebook.com/groups/skatersover50/permalink/756733984435970/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/skatersover50/permalink/756733984435970/)).

For example, the \$2.8 million 6,000 m<sup>2</sup> Denver skatepark is situated near the city’s downtown, offering early morning and flood-lit evening sessions to cater for working-age skaters. “It turns out we had a huge unmet need for skating”, acknowledged Parks & Recreation officer Leslie Roper, “and we’re very happy with the result” (Harnik & Gentles, 2009, pp. 34-38).

## **Neoliberal training and hybrid economies**

Over the last decade, one common strain at skateparks has been the development of stewardship programmes, where young adults learn to procure, operate, monitor and maintain their facilities, as well as to teach learner riders. Apart from the obvious benefits in maintaining terrain and encouraging new riders, those involved gain a sense of pride, achievement and civic responsibility, and so become active and respected community members. According to Peter Whitley (2009) of the Tony Hawk Foundation, the process of petitioning for a skatepark, for example, often builds substantial civic engagement, during which “skateboarders go from getting tickets and having their boards confiscated to being on a first-name basis with city council members” (Edwards, 2015). Once a skatepark is constructed, even deeper community ties can be formed; at the tough working-class Franklin skatepark in Michigan, studied by Petrone (2008, p. 98

and 118), skaters self-police graffiti, weed-smoking, litter and loud music, and even organise counter-vandalism measures.

As Daniel Turner (2013b; 2017), Ocean Howell (2008, p. 476) and others highlight, through this kind of ‘civilizing process’ urban managers use skateparks to nurture certain character traits in youngsters, principally “personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurialism”, all of these being qualities which equate directly with neoliberal values (cf. Beal et al., 2017). As such, skateparks can also be part of a larger process, in which the relationship between citizens and the state changes from one of ‘entitlement’ to ‘contractualism’ – skaters get skateparks not because they deserve them, but because they earn them through appropriate social behaviour and contributions (cf. Howell, 2008, p. 475).

Issues of commerce and consumption can also be at play, as with the heavy marketing benefits readily discernible at Berlin’s Nike SB Shelter and London’s House of Vans (2014). Occupying 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> of Victorian railway arches, House of Vans integrates free-access skateboarding (bowl and street course) alongside art, music and film facilities (cf. Borden, 2016). Operating as a continuous advertisement for its billion-dollar backer, the nuanced design (by Tim Greatorex, Pete Hellicar and Marc Churchill) and the wide programme of activities are far more generous than the kind of corporate annexation of skateboarding of which some international brands have been accused. It is also a step beyond the kind of corporate sponsorship (Mountain Dew, Pepsi etc.) which, according to Tony Hawk (2015), supports professionals yet still remains outside of core skate values.

House of Vans, then, marks a shift away from the outright opposition between, on the one hand, the ‘authentic’ realms of street-level, spontaneous and unfunded actions and, on the other hand, the ‘inauthentic’ world of spectacularized, controlled and commercial projects. Instead, House of Vans is what Lessig (2008) has termed a ‘hybrid’ economy, operating simultaneously as a commercial economy for financial gain and as a sharing economy for collaborative and collective benefit. In short, House of Vans shows how some skateparks might combine profit, media and control with credibility, performance and disorder.

## **Tourism and regeneration**

Beyond Vans-style marketing, wider skatepark ambitions may also include tourism and even urban regeneration. “Skateparks are no longer seen as a grudging way to deal with the so-called problem of skateboarders”, explains Kyle Duvall “Instead, cities have begun to see them as assets, even showpieces” (Duvall,

2016). Hence alongside neighbourhood facilities, some cities appreciate how skateparks appeal at wider regional, national or even international levels, and so nest within wider planning goals.

One of the first cities to understand this possibility was Louisville, Kentucky, whose Extreme Park (2002) was partly aimed at attracting new visitors. Costing \$2 million, the Metro Government's 3,700 m<sup>2</sup> Wormhoudt-designed skatepark boasted a street course, vert-ramp, several bowls, full-pipe and flood-lit 24/7 opening. The booster intention was successful, and, explained Mayor David Armstrong, Louisville's reputation changed from "a sleepy little southern town" to "an exciting, youthful extreme town". A \$2.2 million reconfiguration (2015) replaced some of the original features with a new bowl, street course, flow-bowl and full-pipe with dramatic upper perforations. Similarly, the SITE-designed 6,200 m<sup>2</sup> Black Pearl skatepark (2005) in the Cayman Islands was constructed both for locals and to boost tourism; Tony Hawk has described it as a "monstrous" rideable landscape that takes over a week to explore (cf. Hawk & Hawk, 2010, pp. 134-136; see also [www.sitedesigngroup.com](http://www.sitedesigngroup.com)).

Also with an eye on tourism is Denmark's \$5.5 million indoor-outdoor 'Streetdome' in Haderslev, designed by Rune Glifberg, Ebbe Lykke and CEBRA architects. Constructed by Grindline, the 4,500 m<sup>2</sup> facility contains a grass-domed weather-proof arena, as well as provision for kayaking, music, parkour and climbing. This "cultural and experiential powerhouse" acts as a "facilitator" where "urban sport, street culture and youthful souls all meet together" ([www.streetdome.dk](http://www.streetdome.dk)). A similar multi-arts programme drives Spain's Factoria Joven ('youth factory') in Merida, where in 2011 architects SelgasCano combined skateboarding, climbing and cycling functions, along with provisions for computing, dance, theatre, video and graffiti, all located amid brightly-coloured architecture (cf. Katz, 2011).

As these kinds of project suggest, skateboarding can generate significant revenues and attract new facilities to its host venues. For example, spectacular events like the X Games may not necessarily aid local skaters, but Los Angeles nonetheless benefitted to the tune of \$50 million for its 2010 X Games, while, for hosting the final round of the Vans Park Series in 2016, Malmö successfully negotiated for Vans to provide the permanent Kroksbäck skatepark, which also acts as a social space for low-income housing residents (cf. Bradley, 2013; Wright, 2016). And on an even larger scale, and perhaps unique in skateboarding history is the world's first multi-storey concrete skatepark, an 'urban sports centre' funded by the Roger de Haan Charitable Trust and in 2018 under construction in Folkestone, UK. Unlike typical out-of-town sites, this skatepark sits within a masterplan to transform a run-down yet central area into a sustainable crea-



tive quarter, and so will help to both encourage youth to stay in Folkestone and to attract new residents. The skatepark – designed by Guy Hollaway Architects and Maverick, with some advisory input from myself – is appropriately ambitious, intersecting innovative architectural design, three storeys of fluid rideable surfaces and substantial community facilities.<sup>2</sup> Here, skateboarding, design artistry, community engagement and urban regeneration are all at play.

## BUILDING LIVES

Skateboarding’s sharing culture, as explored by Paul O’Connor (2016), has an intrinsic rhythm of inclusivity. This ranges from a simple gesture like catching a skater’s wayward board, to passing on equipment to impoverished riders, and, as we shall see, acts of charity and benevolence. In addition, skateboarding offers a ‘prefigurative’ politics which, in its practices and ethos, embodies the world it wishes to create. This is a significant extension to my previous emphasis on skateboarding’s critique of capitalism, namely that, alongside skateboarding as a performative critique of capitalism’s values and tenets, so skateboarding culture suggests participation and inclusion as ways to live in the world (cf. Borden, 2001, pp. 173-260). This prefigurative politics, stresses O’Connor (2016, p. 41), is therefore not focused solely on appropriating urban space, but also contains a ‘transformative edge’ which seeks to preserve “the values, attitudes, and knowledge” (ibid., p. 41) of skateboarding.

How then might this occur? Skateboarding, it has been frequently argued, can potentially challenge barriers of class, race, age and gender (cf. Borden, 2019, Chapter 3). Its qualities of friendship, sharing and independence, as well as its non-hierarchical organisation, opposition to rules, cynicism towards commercial exploitation, and embracing of both failure and achievement, all impart skateboarding with a different attitude to urban living than one of anonymised, self-centred society. But if this is skateboarding’s internal logic, how might it move outside of itself, and so influence or aid others?

Skateboarders have often sought to raise funds for charities and special causes. Thousands of such acts have been undertaken, and to cite but a few, Jack Smith has crossed the USA several times to generate funds for medical charities, David Cornthwaite’s 3,621 mile expedition from Perth to Brisbane during 2006 and 2007 generated £20,000, in 1994 ‘TransWorld’ launched Board AID to fo-

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2 See the article ‘Guy Hollaway Plans to Put Folkestone on the Map’ in the Magazine *Dezeen* (15. May 2015), [www.dezeen.com](http://www.dezeen.com).

cus on teenagers with AIDS, and in 2005 the ‘Lords of Dogtown Art Collection’ exhibition supported Boarding for Breast Cancer (cf. O’Connor, 2016, p. 37).

Beyond these substantial acts of fund-raising, yet another benefit of skateboarding rests in its relationship to education, learning and wider social enterprise, and it is these areas that we now turn.

## **Education and learning**

As Petrone’s study of Michigan skateparks demonstrates, learning to skate is simultaneously collaborative and individualised, anti-competitive and aspirational, and trans-generational and embodied, and so is often apprentice-like in its procedures. It is also dependent on the skater actually wishing to participate and on a range of teaching modes. In particular, skaters can be both mentors and learners, thus allowing every participant to make original contributions to communities (cf. Petrone, 2008, pp. 167-168 und pp. 227-235). This suggests that skateboarding’s mode of learning is inherently flexible and open, consequently extending opportunities for assimilation, acquisition and understanding, and clearly these attributes also have the potential to be highly relevant for education (cf. O’Connor, 2016).

How might this work in practice? Sometimes, as Russ Howell (2008) and Ben Wixon (2009) have both argued, this can mean skateboard riding itself being directly inserted into school curricula (cf. Gillogly, 1976). Indeed, Maine’s Gould Academy and Malmö’s Bryggeriet Gymnasium both boast indoor skateparks which ‘blur the boundaries between school and leisure’, with Bryggeriet even extending across its curriculum the formative assessment educational approach of Dylan William and the equivalent skateboarding ethos of constantly checking one’s own development (cf. [www.bryggeriet.org](http://www.bryggeriet.org)).

Nor is this just about a few schools. In the 2010s, New Zealand’s OnBoard Skate has promoted skateboarding within schools’ physical education programmes, while the ‘New PE’ – including skateboarding, snowboarding and land paddling – has been actively promoted across North America. In the USA, the Skate Pass company’s system has been developed to stimulate not only child health but personal expression, cooperation and friendship, and its curriculum development and teacher training, backed by ready-made packages of skateboards and safety equipment, have consequently been taken up across the US, as well as in Canada, Germany, Singapore and the Dominican Republic. In a more competitive vein, US organisations like the National Scholastic Skateboarding League (founded 2010) and the National High School Skateboard Association

(founded 2008) facilitate inter-school skateboard contests with scheduled fixtures and league tables (cf. Loewe, 2008).

Many of these initiatives have particularly connected with hard-to-reach kids, with those suffering from obesity and with those many children who dislike the combative, stressful and regulated nature of traditional school sports such as football, tennis, gymnastics and athletics. For example, in 2004, pro skater Stevie Williams and his father Steven Lassiter set up Philadelphia's Educate to Skate Foundation, with the express aim of running after-school programmes for at-risk youth. The impact of these kinds of project on participants can be immediate and significant; as one father commented of his kids after a Skateboarding Australia session in Brisbane, "because their bodies are all excited, they're really positive about their homework. I've seen my boys just gain so much confidence" (Stewart, 2013; cf. Willing & Shearer, 2016).

Since the mid-2000s, CreateaSkate, a non-profit initiative set up by skateboard manufacturer Paul Schmitt, has offered a different kind of school programme, this time focusing on skateboard decks and encouraging pupils to deploy their mathematics, science, language, design and engineering skills. Similar thematics lie behind other projects, such as the Action Science programme of science, technology, engineering and mathematics offered by Bill Robertson (aka Dr Skateboard), the Skatepark Mathematics Extravaganza (2014) which engaged Texan high school students in real world explorations of data-gathering, physics, geometry and algebra, a Brazilian-Portuguese project using the ollie move to teach Newton's laws of physics, and the UK's FAR Academy syllabus for designing and building decks (cf. Robertson, 2014; Dias, Carvalho & Vianna, 2016; [www.thefaracademy.co.uk](http://www.thefaracademy.co.uk)). For the humanities, Georgina Badoni (2009) has shown how the classroom-based study of skateboards designed by Native Americans can yield unique insights into historical events, personal stories, cultural beliefs and traditions, while the Colonialism Board Company uses skateboards enhanced with historical documents to educate Canadians about their country's colonialist past (cf. Baica, 2015). Entrepreneurialism too can be addressed; at Toronto's Oasis Skateboard Factory, students work on developing skate brands and managing a design business (cf. Dart, 2015).

Finally, university-level education is another active territory for exploring skateboarding and its related cultural and social dimensions. Alongside the research and teaching undertaken by academics worldwide, there are now a handful of intensive offerings. Zachary Sanford offers a course on action sports management at the University of Dayton, Ohio, covering themes such as authenticity, criminality, the X Games, the Olympics and representations of athletes, and Neftalie Williams runs a programme on skateboarding business and culture at

the University of Southern California. A few academic departments also have concentrations of PhD researchers focused on skateboarding-related studies, including those at University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture and Waikato University's Sport and Leisure Studies.

### **Social enterprise**

Skaters often articulate how skateboarding has saved them from a life of drugs, gangs and crime. "All the people I know like, they all fucking in jail", remarked London rider Karim Bakthouai. "I didn't want that, I ain't about that, I'd rather be skating" (Borden, 2016, p. 94). And as White (2015, pp. 80-103) reports, skateboarding shields black and ethnic Bronx riders from police harassment, provides an affirmative community and helps skaters avoid gang membership. Beyond the actual riding of skateboards, providing skateparks is another way to engage with at-risk members of society, while even more can be done via those social enterprises which deploy skateboarding to engage with youth, the disempowered and the disadvantaged.

Perhaps the most successful and well known of skateboarding social enterprises is Skateistan. Oliver Percovich, the Australian skater who in 2008 founded Skateistan in Kabul, Afghanistan, and is now its executive director, explains how, after many decades of civil war and fluctuating ruling powers, the children who make up seventy per cent of the Afghanistan Muslim population have only roadsides in which to play. Girls are banned from riding bicycles or flying kites, but they are allowed to skateboard, and so Skateistan teaches girls and boys alike to ride alongside an arts-based curriculum ranging from world cultures, human rights and environmental studies to nutrition, hygiene and storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

The aim here is to break the cycles of violence, desperation and poverty to which Kabul youth are commonly accustomed, and instead to build confidence and other skills.

"When it comes down to it, kids just want to be kids", explains Percovich. "Skateboarding provides that because it's fun and challenging. It lets them forget their problems for a

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3 See Fitzpatrick, J. (Ed.) (2012), *Skateistan: the Tale of Skateboarding in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Skateistan; *Skateistan – To Live and Skate Kabul*, (dir. Orlando Von Einsiedel, 2011); *Skateistan – Four Wheels and a Board in Kabul*, (dir. Kai Sehr, 2010); *Afghanistan's Girl Skaters – Kabul 2012*, [www.vimeo.com/46337060](http://www.vimeo.com/46337060); *Skateboarding in Afghanistan*, Orlando Percovich, TEDxSydney', (2014), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnYN2yDqZew](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnYN2yDqZew); and [www.skateistan.org](http://www.skateistan.org).

moment. Once kids are hooked on skateboarding, so much more is possible. Skateboarding itself teaches important life skills, like creativity and problem solving” (Borden, 2015).

Through this approach, and aided by key workers such as Max Henninger, Shams Razi, Sharna Nolan and many others, Skateistan’s achievements have been considerable, even when measured simply in terms of skateboarding. By 2012, some 500 Afghan kids were skaters, of which forty per cent were female; a year later, it reached 850 youth weekly with between forty and fifty per cent female participation in all activities. Skaters like Noorzai Ibrahim and Merza reached an advanced level, joining the DC Shoes Europe pro team on a visit to the United Arab Emirates, while disabled skaters like Mohammad Bilal Mirbat Zai also won competitions. Two skateparks, one in Kabul and another in Mazar-e-Sharif, were built.

Skateistan’s most significant achievements, however, lie beyond skateboarding itself. Keen to avoid charges of cultural imperialism and imposing western skateboarding on Kabul children, Skateistan provides wider knowledge and social skills; as O’Connor notes, change at Skateistan ultimately comes not from skateboarding per se but from the bodies of the riders, such that “skateboarding is in multiple ways a vehicle for transformation but not the driving force” (O’Connor, 2016, p. 38). In short, at Skateistan skateboarding is the method, and not the destination.

In this context, Skateistan’s ‘Skate and Create’, ‘Back to School’ and ‘Youth Leadership’ programmes variously teach the kids about health and nutrition, operate workshops on arts, computing and environmental issues, and hold sessions on Dari language, mathematics and Qur’anic study, as well as helping children to build confidence, courage, self-esteem and trust. Working, learning and playing with each other, the kids develop friendships across Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek ethnicities, as well as recognising gender-based equality; one of the first things the boys learn is that the girls have equal rights to skate.

“Even in the most desolate of situations”, notes Lukas Feireiss, “skateboarding, as a performative instrument for transformation, teaches the children of Skateistan not to accept the city and therefore society as it is, but to create their own city, their own spaces and their own futures. In its essence, the power of skateboarding in Afghanistan is about what it symbolizes: the freedom of movement and the empowerment of the individual beyond all restrictions and conventions” (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 191).

Or as the fourteen-year-old Afghan girl Negina simply states, “skateboarding lets me feel like I’m flying” (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 275). These achievements are sub-

stantial and profound, helping to do no less than, according to Skateistan volunteer Sophie Friedel, ‘build peace’, and in 2013 Skateistan was included in ‘The Global Journal’s’ list of one hundred top NGOs (cf. Friedel, 2015, p. 59). Many professionals have visited and supported Skateistan, including Cairo Foster, Tony Hawk, Louisa Menke, Kenny Reed and Jamie Thomas, while Black Box, Fallen, IOU Ramps, Route One, Skateroom, Spitfire, Theeve, TSG and Zero are among the skate companies to have provided support, as have Architecture for Humanity, the Canadian, Danish, Finnish, German, Norwegian, Swiss and US governments, the Kabul municipality and the Afghan National Olympic Committee. As a result of this kind of worldwide backing, by 2015 Skateistan was able to spread its operations beyond Kabul, setting up facilities in northern Afghanistan, Vietnam, Cambodia and Johannesburg.

Numerous other social enterprises are also using skateboarding for community aims. Holly Thorpe (2016) has identified how skateboarding and other alternative sports have helped form “therapeutic landscapes” in post-disaster zones caused by war, earthquakes and hurricanes, and so allow youth to redefine physical and emotional disaster geographies and rebuild social networks and connections. Since 2008 Board Rescue has provided equipment to low-income kids and at-risk youth in the US, showing children how exercise, determination, practice and commitment can lead to positive results. During the 2010s, large numbers of other community-oriented projects – like Stoked Mentoring in the USA, Cuba Skate in Cuba, Ethiopia Skate and Megabiskate in Ethiopia, Janwaar Castle in Madhya Pradesh, India, Skate-aid, SkateQilya and SkatePal in Palestine, 7Hills skatepark in Amman, Jordan, Engineers Without Borders and Outlangish in Cape Town, Latraac in Athens, Skate Style in Cambodia, Bedouins in Tunisia and the international chapters of Skate for Change – have all deployed skateboarding to counter deep-rooted issues like alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, violence, religious intolerance, ethnic and gender prejudices, and access to education. Amid abandoned properties in Detroit, for example, the Ride-It Sculpture Park (2012) uses art and greenspace to form a youth-oriented skatepark and community hub, while, as ‘I Am Thalente’ (a film by Natalie Johns, 2015) shows, South Africa’s Indigo Skate Camp project has enriched the lives of Thalente Biyela and other local Durban kids (cf. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADtErLjggH8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADtErLjggH8)).

Even more projects are also active. A.Skate ([www.askate.org](http://www.askate.org)) provides skate lessons for those with autism and raises awareness about this condition, thus addressing related problems with self-esteem, anxiety, truancy, depression and suicide. Also in the US, the All Nations Skate Project, Stronghold Society and Wounded Knee 4-Directions skateparks have addressed violence, drugs, alcohol

and suicide among Native youth; some support has come here from Jeff Ament of rock band Pearl Jam, who has also helped fund several skateparks in less-privileged neighbourhoods (cf. Ament, 2015; Nieratko, 2015; Weaver, 2016 see also [www.strongholdsociety.org](http://www.strongholdsociety.org)).<sup>4</sup> Canada's The Forks skatepark in Winnipeg runs skate camps plus film and photography workshops for under-privileged youth, and is co-located with the world's first Human Rights Museum (cf. Daniello, 2007). In all these projects, skateboarding is part of an answer to complex social conditions, where both the act of skateboarding itself, and the avenues it opens up, are of equal value.

Complementary to many of these initiatives is the Tony Hawk Foundation, which supports disadvantaged communities and at-risk children through skatepark provision. Started in 2001 by Hawk and his sponsors, the Foundation supports public skateparks and related projects, partly by giving design and construction advice, and partly by supplying funding. By 2017, the foundation had helped 569 US skateparks to the tune of over \$5.5 million, provided over 900 skateparks worldwide with technical assistance, donated \$100,000 to Skateistan and reached over 5.4 million skaters per year. As with Skateistan and other community initiatives, the benefits often go far beyond skateboarding itself. "A skatepark project can teach young people a lifelong lesson in the power of perseverance", explains Hawk & Hawk (2010, p. 155). "Kids discover they can accomplish something by working within the system rather than beating their heads against it. They learn how to communicate in a way that will encourage adults to listen, and they go from feeling alienated to empowered" (ibid., p. 164).

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4 See e.g. 'Skate life an an Indian Reservation Skate or Die' ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYRINJZZqWU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYRINJZZqWU)).

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